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Habitat III thematic meeting on intermediate cities: urban growth and renewal

Note by the secretariat

The secretariat of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) hereby transmits the outcome document of the Habitat III thematic meeting on intermediate cities: urban growth and renewal, held in Cuenca, Ecuador, from 9 to 11 November 2015.

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Outcome document of the Habitat III thematic meeting on intermediate cities: urban growth and renewal

Promoting networks of intermediate cities to achieve sustainable and territorial development

We, the participants in the Habitat III thematic meeting on intermediate cities: urban growth and renewal, hosted by the municipality of Cuenca, Ecuador, from 9 to 11 November 2015, representing a wide range of stakeholder groups, including civil society, national Governments, local and regional authorities, intergovernmental organizations, the United Nations system, academicians, researchers and professionals, the private sector, farmers, foundations, philanthropies, women, youth and children,

Gathered to discuss the relevance of intermediate cities in the overall configuration of territorial systems and their contribution to sustainable development ahead of the formulation of a New Urban Agenda at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), to be held in Quito from 17 to 20 October 2016,

Express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the municipality of Cuenca for the excellent organization of the conference and our gratitude to the residents for the warm hospitality accorded to all participants,

Reaffirming the need and the responsibility to achieve sustainable urbanization to promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable societies,

Welcoming the adoption by the General Assembly at its seventieth session of the document entitled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", including the Sustainable Development Goals and, in particular, Goal 11, "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable",

Noting that climate change impacts are unfolding rapidly, thereby undermining the livelihoods of people in cities and human settlements, threatening poverty eradication efforts and putting at risk the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing the need for ambitious action towards sustainable urbanization in order to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change and, to that end, hopeful that a new agreement on climate change will be reached at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to be held in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015,

Recognizing the potential contribution to sustainable development of all sections of society, including persons and groups in vulnerable situations, as well as their specific needs,

Recognizing also the need for a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development that guarantees the full exercise of citizenship and the realization of all human rights, including the right to development,

Bearing in mind that the concept of intermediate cities stems from their role as intermediaries within a territorial system, interacting with bigger cities, towns and other human settlements and more effectively articulating urban-rural linkages,

Mindful of the differences of population size considered to define intermediate cities, which may vary in different regions, ranging from 20,000/50,000 inhabitants to 500,000 inhabitants and up to 1 million inhabitants in specific countries and regional contexts,

Appreciating that, whereas the world is now predominantly urban, currently more than half of the urban population lives in small and intermediate cities,

Recognizing that intermediate cities, for their size, offer opportunities for more effective governance and management and may facilitate improved social cohesion and a sense of identity and belonging as well as a balanced relationship with the surrounding natural environment,

Recognizing also that intermediate cities offer government administrative functions related to security, health, education, social services and culture closer to their population,

Recognizing further that intermediate cities offer services to rural areas and as such often become "stopping points" for populations that could have migrated to larger cities and metropolises, and that these towns can be in a better position to offer decent jobs as well as land and housing at a fraction of what they would cost in a big city and often with a higher quality of life,

Bearing in mind that compactness, density and connectivity, integrating the natural proximity factor of small and intermediate cities, potentially make intermediate cities more resilient, efficient and economically viable, and reduce the environmental footprint and the contribution of such cities to climate change,

Mindful of the role of intermediate cities in promoting balanced regional sustainable development, through the integration of urban and rural functions into the regional and national spatial system, strengthening the linkages within the territory, alleviating poverty, providing a market for agricultural produce and extending basic services to rural areas,

Cognizant of the current strong pressure many intermediate cities are experiencing to achieve rapid growth and the related difficulties to manage urban development and meet new demands for housing, land, infrastructure and basic services apart from the associated risk of losing their comparative advantages in terms of economic viability, social cohesion and quality of life, as well as their environmental sustainability,

Noting that small and intermediate cities often have limited capacity to effectively anticipate and finance planned extension and to enforce measures to control unplanned development and avoid the formation of informal settlements,

Noting with concern the current decline of density in favour of escalating sprawl and unplanned peri-urbanization of intermediate cities, which poses challenges to the management and sustainability of intermediate cities, implying higher costs of infrastructure and maintenance, affecting the advantage of agglomeration economies and the unnecessary loss of agricultural and other productive land as well as land with environmental value,

1. *Advocate* for the development of a more balanced system of cities and human settlements through inclusive national urban policies and strategy

frameworks, as well as effective regional and territorial planning, to ensure better distributed urban growth;

2. *Also advocate* for the provision of appropriate legal, fiscal and organizational frameworks to promote balanced and responsive urban development, strengthened social equity and gender equality as well as the full realization of human rights, in accordance with the religious and cultural values of individual countries and their sovereignty;

3. *Encourage* strengthening the coordination between different levels of Government, implementing the principle of subsidiarity, in the planning and implementation processes of intermediate cities, which should include the development of multi-actor partnerships and inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms, and overcoming challenges related to administrative-boundary constraints;

4. *Recommend* that civil society participation in decision-making and planning processes be promoted, including in implementing and monitoring policies as well as in defining appropriate indicators, which should be done while strengthening capacity, with particular attention to youth and women as well as persons in vulnerable situations;

5. *Also recommend* that resilience in cities be strengthened in order to reduce citizens' exposure and vulnerability to climate change and other economic, social and environmental shocks, including natural and anthropogenic disasters;

6. *Advocate* for a global commitment to cooperate internationally in sustainable urban development that allows access by stakeholders in intermediate cities to finance, technology and capacity-building, based on principles of equity, good governance, transparency, accountability and solidarity;

7. *Also advocate* for the recognition of the importance of placing the right to the city for all, encompassing the notion of accessibility and affordability, at the centre of urban development policies, combining citizen participation with the right to education, health, housing, services and employment opportunities, recognizing diversity and promoting conviviality, identity and a sense of belonging;

8. *Recommend* that the processes of fiscal, political and administrative decentralization be strengthened, with a clear distribution of tasks, responsibilities and resources, building the capacity of local governments to promote effective citizen participation and implement sustainable urban development policies;

9. *Advocate* for the adoption of culture as a key tool for promoting sustainable urban development, by preserving the urban, environmental and cultural identity of cities, fostering the quality of life and the development of a creative economy, thus contributing to poverty eradication and increasing social cohesion;

10. *Encourage* adequate investments in small and medium urban centres, including market centres, focusing on food security, capacity-building, sustainable infrastructure and the provision of basic services, the creation of decent jobs and the strengthening of social cohesion, and also encourage the promotion of the role of small and intermediate cities in strengthening food security systems through the provision of sound infrastructure, access to land and effective trade links, to ensure that small-scale farmers are linked to larger supply chains;

11. *Recommend* that sustainable and integrated approaches to urban growth and regeneration be furthered, based on the assumption of a correlation between urbanization and development, which should consider ensuring adequate planning rules and regulations for the design, production and management of efficient and equitable human settlements, qualitative and inclusive urban planning and design and efficient and transparent municipal finance systems to ensure effective investments and management, as well as the equitable redistribution of benefits generated by urban development;

12. *Also recommend* that urban regeneration, renewal and informal settlement upgrading processes be developed, which should not be implemented at the expense of vulnerable inhabitants of cities and should be based on inclusive participatory planning, oriented to harnessing the cultural diversity and identity, as well as the urban heritage, both tangible and intangible, of the intermediate cities;

13. *Further recommend* that rapid growth in intermediate cities be anticipated and addressed through planned cities extensions and infill, including upgrading of informal settlements, with the aim of sustaining density, compactness and connectivity;

14. *Encourage* ensuring social and cultural mix as well as mix of uses in order to maintain the "good vibrancy" of the city and foster proximity factors, so as to enhance the quality of life and social inclusion, reap the benefits of agglomeration economies, reduce energy demand as well as transit time and emissions, towards the improved health of citizens as well as low-emission and climate-resilient development;

15. *Recommend* that policies and interventions be further developed, including integrating mobility plans into overall urban plans, to decrease the demand for private vehicles in urban centres and discourage urban sprawl, which may include ensuring the political and financial commitment to develop sustainable trunk infrastructure and collective transport systems;

16. *Urge* that support be provided to local governments of intermediate cities to identify, develop and sustainably exploit local assets and urban development opportunities for inclusive growth, job creation, the maintenance of existing livelihoods and increased tax revenue;

17. *Urge* national and local governments, the private sector and civil society, to collaborate to increase economic development in intermediate cities and surrounding regions, towards increasing jobs and the creation of microenterprises for inclusive growth and increased tax revenue;

18. *Recommend* that adequate housing policies be adopted that meet existing urban planning strategies and regulations as a key factor for the development of intermediate cities;

19. *Also recommend* that accessible, safe, inclusive and quality public space be provided adequately to foster urban equity, social cohesion and better quality of life, with particular attention to women, children, elder persons and persons with disabilities;

20. *Advocate* for appropriately embracing information and communications technology opportunities to foster civic engagement, data collection and analysis for

city planning, the enhancement of transparent city management and the provision of more efficient service;

21. *Recommend* that effective public regulation of the land market be applied to ensure the equitable and sustainable provision of land suitable for urban development and the avoidance of speculation and gentrification, as well as to ensure the capture and equitable distribution of the added value obtained as a result of public decisions;

22. *Also recommend* that policies and programmes designed to support the contribution of small and intermediate cities to sustainable urbanization be informed by evidence-based and multidisciplinary research, regularly monitored and evaluated in a transparent way;

23. *Advocate* for the achievement of a truly inclusive New Urban Agenda, where no one is left behind, with a holistic and people-centred approach that informs, involves and engages civil society, including persons with disabilities and their organizations, in all aspects of urban development;

24. *Commit* ourselves to promote the principles and the recommendations included in this Cuenca Declaration for Habitat III, ensuring that this effectively contributes to the formulation of the New Urban Agenda at the next United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, to be held in Quito in October 2016.